Giants and Dwarfs: An Outline of *Gulliver's Travels*

Gulliver's Travels is an amazing rhetorical achievement. It is the classic children's story and it is a rather obscene tale. Swift was able to charm innocence and amuse corruption, and this is a measure of his talent. I can think of no parallel: Hans Christian Andersen for children, Boccaccio for adults. But, most of all, it is a philosophic book presented in images of overwhelming power. Swift had not only the judgment with which to arrive at a reasoned view of the world, but the fancy by means of which he could recreate that world in a form which teaches where argument fails and which satisfies all while misleading none.

Gulliver's travel memoirs make abundantly clear that he is a Yahoo in the decisive sense. He says "the thing which is not," or, to put it into Yahoo language, he is a liar. This does not mean that I do not believe he underwent the adventures he relates; but he does have something to hide. A small bit of evidence can be gleaned from his own defense of his conduct with a great Lilliputian lady, who had conceived a passion for his person. Gulliver grounds his apology on the alleged fact that no one ever came to see him secretly. But immediately afterward he tells of the secret visit of a minister. We can only suppose the worst in the affair between the lady and Gulliver. And we may further suppose that Gulliver has certain hidden thoughts and intentions which are only to be revealed by closely cross-examining him.[1] He indicates this himself at the close of his travels when he swears to his veracity. He uses for this solemn occasion Sinon's treacherous oath to the Trojans, by means of which that worthy

[1]*Gulliver's Travels* (New York: Random House, 1950), pp. 71, 73.

managed to gain admittance for the horse and its concealed burden of Greeks.[2]

I should like to suggest that this book is also such a container, filled with Greeks who are, once introduced, destined to conquer a new Troy, or, translated into "the little language," destined to conquer Lilliput. In other words, I wish to contend that *Gulliver's Travels* is one of the last explicit statements in the famous Quarrel between the Ancients and Moderns and perhaps the greatest intervention in that notorious argument. By means of the appeal of its myth, it keeps alive the classical vision in ages when even the importance of the quarrel is denied, not to speak of the importance of that classical viewpoint, which appears to have been swamped by history. The laughter evoked by *Gulliver's Travels* is authorized by a standard drawn from Homer and Plato.

Prior to entering directly into the contents of the book, I should try to make this assertion somewhat more extrinsically plausible. The quarrel itself is today regarded as a petty thing, rather ridiculous on both sides, a conventional debate between old and new, reactionary and progressive, which later ages have resolved by way of synthesis. Both sides lacked perspective; intellectual history is but one long continuous development. Moreover, the quarrel is looked on largely as a purely literary dispute, originating in the comparison of Greek and Roman poetry with French. Now this understanding is quite different from that of the participants, who, if not always the best judges, must be the first witnesses in any hearing. They understood the dispute over poetry to be a mere subdivision of an opposition between two comprehensive systems of radically opposed thought, one finding its source in ancient philosophy, the other in modern philosophy. The moderns believed that they had found the true principles of nature and that, by means of their methods, new sources of power could be found in physical nature, politics, and the arts. These new principles represented a fundamental break with classical thought and were incompatible with it. The poetic debate was meant, on the part of the advocates of modernity, only to show the superiority of modern thought based on modern talents and modern freedom in the domain where the classics were most indisputably masters and models. The quarrel involved the highest principles about the first causes of all things and the best way of life. It marked a crossroad, one of the very few at which mankind has been asked to make a decisive change in direction. The choice once made, we have forgotten that this was not the only road, that there was another once before us, either because

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 332; cf. Virgil, *Aeneid*, II, 79–80.

we are ignorant of a possible choice or because we are so sure that this is the only road to Larissa. It is only by return to our starting point that the gravity of the choice can be realized; and at the crossroad one finds the quarrel. It is not, I repeat, a quarrel among authors as such, but among principles.

In his own way, Swift presents and contrasts those principles. He characterizes ancient philosophy as a bee whose wings produce music and flight and who thus "visits all the blossoms of the field and garden . . . and in collecting from them enriches himself without the least injury to their beauty, their smell, or their taste." The bee is opposed to a house-building spider, who thinks he produces his own world from himself and is hence independent, but who actually feeds on filth and produces excrement. As the bee says, "So, in short, the question comes all to this; whether is the nobler being of the two, that which by a lazy contemplation of four inches round, by an overweening pride, feeding and engendering on itself, turns all into excrement and venom, producing nothing at all, but flybane and a cobweb; or that which by a universal range, with long search, much study, true judgment, and distinction of things, brings honey and wax."[3]

This description is drawn from one of Swift's earliest writings, *The Battle of the Books*. *Gulliver's Travels* was one of his latest. Throughout his life Swift saw the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns as the issue in physics, poetry, and politics, and it is in the light of it that he directed his literary career and his practical life. The quarrel is the key to the diverse strands of this various man; his standards of judgment are all classical; his praise and blame are always in accord with that of Plato. He learned how to live within his own time in the perspective of an earlier one. Swift, the Tory and the High Churchman, was a republican and a nonbeliever.

Gulliver's Travels is always said to be a satire, and there is no reason to quarrel with this designation. But it is not sufficient, for satire is constructed with a view to what is serious and ridiculous, good and bad. It is not enough to say that human folly is ridiculed; what was folly to Aristophanes would not have seemed so to Tertullian, and conversely. If the specific intention of the satire is not uncovered, the work is trivialized. Swift intended his book to instruct, and the character of that instruction is lost if we do not take seriously the issues he takes seriously. But we do not even recognize the real issues in the Quarrel, let alone try to decide which side had the greatest share of truth. In our time, only Leo Strauss has provided us with the

[3]*Gulliver's Travels*, *op. cit.*, pp. 529–30.

scholarship and the philosophic insight necessary to a proper confrontation of ancients and moderns, and hence his works are the prolegomena to a recovery of Swift's teaching. Swift's rejection of modern physical and political science seems merely ill-tempered if not viewed in relation to a possible alternative, and it is Leo Strauss who has elaborated the plausibility, nay, the vital importance, of that alternative. Now we are able to turn to Swift, not only for amusement, but for possible guidance as to how we should live. Furthermore, Swift's art of writing explicitly follows the rhetorical rules for public expression developed by the ancients, of which we have been reminded by Professor Strauss. That rhetoric was a result of a comprehensive reflection about the relation between philosophy and politics, and it points to considerations neglected by the men of letters of the Enlightenment. *Gulliver's Travels* is in both substance and form a model of the problems which we have been taught to recognize as our own by Leo Strauss. It is fitting that this essay be designed to do him honor; its content is beyond acknowledgment indebted to his learning.

Gulliver's Travels is a discussion of human nature, particularly of political man, in the light of the great split. In general, the plan of the book is as follows: Book I, modern political practice, especially the politics of Britain and France; Book II, ancient political practice on something of a Roman or Spartan model; Book III, modern philosophy in its effect on political practice; Book IV, ancient utopian politics used as a standard for judging man understood as the moderns wished to understand him. By "ancient" Swift means belonging to Greece and Rome—Greece for philosophy and poetry, republican Rome for politics. For Swift, Thomas Aquinas is a modern.[4]

There are many indications of both a substantial and a formal kind, which indicate the order of the parts. For example, Gulliver takes the same ship, the *Adventure,* to both Brobdingnag and the land of the Houyhnhnms. Books I and III are the only ones which are directly susceptible of an analysis appropriate to a *roman à clef:* Lilliput is full of characters clearly identifiable as personages in British politics, and Laputa is peopled largely by modern philosophers and members of the Royal Academy. The only clearly identifiable modern elements in Brobdingnag or the land of the Houyhnhnms are those in England referred to by the travelling Gulliver. When he is in Lilliput and Laputa (notice the similarity of the names), he tells nothing of his world or native country. He need not, for the reader should recognize

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 533.

it; Gulliver is alien, and the interesting thing is the world seen through his eyes. His perspective is that of a man totally outside England; with the Brobdingnagians and the Houyhnhnms, he is all English, and they are usually foils used to bring out the weaknesses in his nature. In the former case, he is used as the standard for strictures against modern England; in the latter, the Houyhnhnms and Brobdingnagians are used as a standard in criticizing him in the role of a modern Englishman. In one sense the book is all about England; in another, it is all about antiquity. The formula is simply this: when he is good, the others are bad; when he is bad, they are good. The bad others are found in Books I and III, which treat of the recognizably modern. The good others are in Books II and IV, which are, at the least, removed from modernity. Parallel to this movement is Gulliver's sense of shame; in Book I he is shameless—he defecates in a temple and urinates on the palace; and in Lilliput, the people care. In Brobdingnag, where they could not care less, he is full of shame, will not allow himself to be seen performing these functions, and hides behind sorrel leaves.[5] We can say that Gulliver is somehow in between—superior to the inferior and inferior to the superior, but never equal. He lacks something of perfection, but from a certain point of view he is superior to his contemporaries.

Gulliver informs us on his return from Brobdingnag that it was not necessary for him to visit Lilliput in order for him to see Englishmen as Lilliputians; it was only necessary for him to have been to Brobdingnag, for when he landed, he thought himself to be the size of a Brobdingnagian. This was not the case; but having shared their perspective, he could forget his real self and see his likes as he was seen by the giants.[6] The English are truly pygmies. The lesson is that one must study Brobdingnag. Gulliver is as a giant in Lilliput because of what he has learned in Brobdingnag; when he is with the Brobdingnagians, however, he returns to his awareness of himself as a real Lilliputian. He recognizes his weaknesses, but he is great because of his self-consciousness or self-knowledge. He learns "how vain an attempt it is for a man to endeavor to do himself honor among those who are out of all degree of equality or comparison with him."[7]

Swift's device in Lilliput and Brobdingnag is to take moral and intellectual differences and project them in physical dimensions. From this simple change everything else follows. In working this transfor-

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30, 60–61, 103.
[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 168–169.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 138.

mation, he pursues Aristotle's suggestion that nature intends the differences in men's souls to be reflected in their bodies and that men whose bodies are greatly superior, resembling the statues of gods, would readily be accepted as masters.[8] As a literary device, Swift's transformation works wonders; for literature lives on images and sensations, appealing to fancy and imagination, but there is no way that philosophy can make a direct appeal by means of the arts. When the imperceptible differences so suddenly become powerful sensual images, however, all becomes clear. Gulliver's attempts to take the physical beauty of the Lilliputians seriously, or the king of Brobdingnag's holding Gulliver in his hand and asking him if he is a Whig or a Tory, resume hundreds of pages of argument in an instant. And, moreover, the great majority of men cannot, for lack of experience, understand the great superiority of soul which is humanly possible. But when that power is seen in terms of size, all men, if only momentarily, know what superiority is and recognize the difficulties it produces for its possessor and those in its immediate vicinity. To tell men of the vanity of human pretensions may be edifying, but what sermon has the force of the absurd claim that Lilliput is "the terror of the universe"?

Gulliver's adventures in Lilliput are largely an exposition of the problems faced by him and the Lilliputians because of his bigness. With the best of will, neither side can understand the concerns of the other. They do not belong together, but they are forced together, if only by their common humanity—a humanity stretched to its limits. He is imprisoned by them and needs them for his maintenance; they do not know how to get rid of him (if they were to kill him, the stench of his decaying body might sicken the atmosphere) and are torn between fear and distrust, on the one hand, and dazzling hopes for using him, on the other. Their problem is aggravated by their vision: The Lilliputians "see with great exactness but at no great distance." They suffer from a loss of perspective. It is not their fault; that is the way they are built.

What this entails is best revealed when we see giants through the eyes of our Cicerone: nothing could be more revolting than the description of the woman's breast. He sees things which are really there, but he no longer sees the object as a whole; a thing that from the human point of view should be beautiful and attractive becomes in his vision ugly and repulsive. Odors and tastes are distorted; Gulliver in Brobdingnag experiences the literally dirty underside of life. And thus we learn that the Lilliputians experienced him as he did the

[8]Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254[b], 27–39.

Brobdingnagians. One Lilliputian even had the audacity to complain of his smell on a hot day, although he was renowned for his cleanliness.[9] They can never grasp him as he really is; the different parts seem ugly; the ugliness of nature, which disappears in the light of its unity, is their overwhelming impression. In them one can understand the maxim "No man is a hero to his valet; not because he is not a hero but because the valet is a valet." I think there can be little doubt that Swift believes the giant's perspective is ultimately proportionate to the true purpose of things; there is not a simple relativity.

Now, many critics have observed that the recent invention of the microscope and the telescope influenced Swift in his satire on pygmies and giants. If this is true, one can assert that Swift meant to show that the increase in knowledge made possible by these instruments is offset by a corresponding loss of awareness of the whole. The Brobdingnagians have a far-reaching sense of order, totally lacking in the Lilliputians. In Brobdingnag, everything is considered in relation to the kind of man who is to be produced, and learning and actions are accepted or rejected in terms of this standard.

Although Gulliver tries to act in good faith with the Lilliputians, he finds it difficult to observe what they observe and to give their opinions the same cosmic significance that they give them. Lilliput is a monarchy, and all life centers on getting certain vain honors and offices; these purely conventional distinctions form the whole horizon of the important persons in the court, and Gulliver is asked to take them as seriously as the courtiers do, as though this nonsense had a natural status. Gulliver earnestly undertakes to live in these terms: although he is a Nardac and hence of higher rank than the Lord-Treasurer, Gulliver does concede him precedence in virtue of his office. Flattery and interest are the only political motives, and these vices play their role on a stage set by conflict of religious belief. Currently, the country is divided by the struggle between the *slamecksan* and the *tramecksan*—the high heels and the low heels. Swift, who devoted his public life to the High Church, represents the difference between Tory and Whig as constituted by the difference between High Church and Low Church, and the substance of that difference he compares to an infinitesimal difference in the heights of heels. Further, recent Lilliputian history has been dominated by the strife between those who break their eggs at the big end and those who break them at the small, and, more importantly, foreign policy is still dominated by it. This dispute rests on the interpretation of sacred texts and the king's

[9]*Gulliver's Travels*, *op. cit.*, pp. 62, 101, 132–33.

right to determine the canonic interpretation. For such issues wars are fought and nations turned upside down. Gulliver is willing to help his country, but only for its self-defense; he has no crusading fervor.[10]

The nobleman who presents the politico-religious situation to Gulliver concludes by citing the words of the Blundecral: "All true believers break their eggs at the convenient end." "And," he continues, "which is the convenient end, seems in my humble opinion, to be left to every man's conscience, or at least in the power of the chief magistrate to determine." Gulliver's friend proposes a ridiculous solution to a ridiculous problem and resumes, thereby, the range of solutions proposed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the question posed by the demands of the revealed religions on civil society.

There was first the split between Catholic and Protestant and then that between High and Low Church, each pretending to possess the authoritative view of divine things which must guide political life. Due to the irreconcilability of the two opponents and the wars which were their consequence, there then arose a school which said that the king should decide these issues or, alternatively, and more importantly, that there must be freedom in these matters, that the conscience cannot be forced. This school was strongly supported, if only on prudential grounds, by the minority sects, who saw the basis for their preservation in the doctrine of the freedom of the conscience. This way of thinking was the source of the peculiarly modern libertarianism, which holds that a determination of the supreme ends cannot be a part of the political function and that these are a matter for individual decision. This doctrine, which was in its beginnings a mere compromise in order to avoid civil wars, later became absolute and is certainly familiar to us. In the mouth of this dwarf it sounds ridiculously sententious. His formulation must be compared with that of the king of Brobdingnag, commenting on the same problem. He laughed at Gulliver's "odd kind of arithmetic," as he was pleased to call it, "in reckoning the numbers of our people by a computation drawn from the several sects among us, in religion and politics. He said he knew no reason why those who entertain opinions prejudicial to the public should be obliged to change or should not be obliged to conceal them. And, as it was tyranny in any government to require the first, so it was weakness not to enforce the second; for a man may be allowed to keep poisons in his closet, but not to vend them about for cordials."[11]

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 51–53, 57–58.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 147; cf., e.g., Swift, *On the Testimony of Conscience* ("The Prose Works of

This is Swift's own view of the matter and accords with classic traditions. This view presupposes that there is a sensible understanding of the politically beneficial that a ruler may acquire and that there is no reason to compromise the understanding conducive to the general welfare with the freedom of fanatical minorities. Although this is the reasonable position, it does not imply that, given particular circumstances, other doctrines might not be momentarily necessary or helpful; the only thing insisted on is that party and sect are in themselves noxious and that a good regime must be rid of them. The king of Brobdingnag could speak with relative ease in these matters, for there was no history of religious difference or warfare in his realm. The only political problem was the classic and natural one among king, nobility, and people, and that had been solved long before by the establishment of a balanced regime.[12]

Swift himself lived at a time when his nation had long been split by differences of belief which issued in political parties. He took a strong party stand, for he believed that only through the parties could any political goals be achieved in his age. He tried to choose the most reasonable alternative, the one which would best provide the moral basis for a decent regime and the production of good men and good citizens. But there is no doubt that he regarded his situation as defective. Far better would be a regime not vexed by such disputes and habits of belief, one in which the rulers could be guided by reason and faction could be legitimately suppressed without the suppression having the character of one fanatical half of the nation imposing its convictions on the other equally fanatical half. But more of this later. For the moment it is sufficient to say that religion is the central problem of modernity for Swift; and in his utopias the problem is either handled in a pagan way or is totally suppressed. A large part of Gulliver's difficulties in Lilliput are due to a failure to understand this problem or to take a stance in relation to it.

The kinds of compromises that must be made by the prudent man in politics are indicated in Chapter VI of Book I. This chapter is usually regarded as a later, inharmonious addition, in which Swift exposes his own view about the political good. The chapter is introduced on the pretext of presenting the ancient institutions of Lilliput, which have become corrupted. It is often argued that these are not consonant with what has preceded and are only a vehicle for Swift's

---

Jonathan Swift," Vol. IV [London: George Bell, 1898]), pp.120–22; *The Sentiments of a Church of England Man, ibid.*, III, 55.

[12]*Gulliver's Travels, op. cit.*, p. 156.

expression of opinion. However, even a superficial reading of this section would show that the institutions are not the same as those used by the Brobdingnagians or the Houyhnhnms, who are clearly and explicitly stated to be the models. These institutions are undoubtedly an improvement of Lilliput's actual government, as Gulliver states. But they are just as undoubtedly a compromise with the best institutions, based on the real practices and principles of eighteenth-century England. Swift proposes a reform, but not that of an idealist. He knows that root and branch changes are impossible; one must begin from the character of those who are to be reformed.

There is much of John Locke in what Gulliver relates. Fraud is one of the greatest of crimes in the kingdom, for without trust credit is destroyed. Rewards for virtue as well as punishments for vice are established; the rewards consist of sums of money. Commerce and money—essentially selfish interest—are used as the basis for reform, and the motivation for decent conduct is gain. Moreover, the system of education separates parents from children, allowing the children to be raised by the state because "they will never allow that a child is under any obligation to his father for begetting him, or to his mother for bringing him into the world, which considering the miseries of human life, was neither a benefit in itself, nor intended so by his parents, whose thoughts, in their love encounters, were otherwise employed." The parents cannot be trusted to educate their children because they are naturally completely selfish. Thus the children are to be trained to citizenship by the state; the formula repeats the teaching of Locke on filial obligation. These three crucial heads of the reform rest on a principle of egotism. A fourth is that all Lilliputians must believe in a divine Providence, but on purely political grounds. Their kings claim to be deputies of Providence; hence their authority would be undermined by disbelief. There are other possible bases for respect for authority, but given the English situation, this is the only viable one. The specific content of the belief is not made precise. It is consistent with a plurality of sects. Gulliver outlines a set of institutions which would be good for Lilliputians, given their specific character; a wise man could support them with a good conscience, but with full awareness that other institutions might be more admirable, given a better people. This might make him seem to be in contradiction with himself, but he would only seem so.

Gulliver's disaster in Lilliput occurs because he is too big for the Lilliputians; the specific charges against him are only corollaries of that fact. The outcome was inevitable. Civil society cannot endure such disproportionate greatness; it must either submit itself to the one

best man or ostracize him. The condemnation of this comic Socrates is not to be blamed on the prejudices of the Lilliputians; it is a necessity that no amount of talk or education will do away with. The four major charges against Gulliver are as follows. (1) He urinated on the royal palace, even though there was a law against urinating within its confines. (2) He refused to subdue Blefuscu, to utterly destroy the Big-Endian exiles, to force the Blefuscudians to confess the Lilliputian religion, and to accept the Lilliputian monarch. (3) He was friendly to the Blefuscudian ambassadors who came to treat for peace and helped them in their mission. (4) He had the intention of paying a visit to Blefuscu.[13]

If we generalize these charges, they would read as follows. (1) He does not accept the judgments of the Lilliputians about what is noble and what is base. He does what is necessary to preserve the palace, using means indifferent in themselves but repulsive to the queen; from her point of view, of course, what was done was pretty disagreeable. Swift's humor in defense of the crown, which displeased Queen Anne, has been compared to the acts cited in this charge. It is also reminiscent of Aristophanes' Dung-beetle, who, because he goes low, can go high. But the chief thing to underline is the fact that, because of their different situations, Gulliver cannot have the same sentiments as the Lilliputians about what is fair and what is ugly. He identifies the fair or noble with the useful—a rational procedure, but one which can hardly be accepted by civil society which lives on the distinction between the two. (2) He does not share the religious prejudices of the nation and is unwilling to be inhuman for the sake of what can only appear as senseless dogma to him. He cannot see the importance of the faith or of the ambition of the king. Big end, small end—they all appear human to him. (3) He does not accept the distinction between friend and enemy defined by the limits of the nation. Once again, common humanity is what he sees. At the same time, from the Lilliputian standpoint, how can a foreigner who consorts with the enemy be trusted—especially a foreigner of such exceptional power? They can only attribute to him the motivations which they already know; they cannot see the interior workings of his soul, and, if they could, they would not understand them. By any canons, Gulliver's behavior is suspicious, no matter how innocent it may actually be. How can the Lilliputians see he has no ambition to subdue both kingdoms and make himself ruler of the known world? How could they believe that what seems so important to them is too

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 74–76.

petty even to be considered by Gulliver? (4) Gulliver is not satisfied in his new home; he thinks there is much to be learned elsewhere. He may find what pleases him more in another land. His loyalty is questionable; he has the dubious taste for being away from home.

Gulliver is condemned because the Lilliputians discovered in the palace fire that his moral taste was not the same as theirs. He did not behave as a good citizen; he did not identify what is good with what is Lilliputian. The court jealousies and hatreds were only predisposing factors in the ultimate crisis. Given the uses which could be made of him, he was bound to be an object of flattery and conspiracy, as he appeared to incline to one side or another. The proposal for resolving the Gulliver crisis is the standard for civil society's use of genius: he is to be blinded, for thus he would retain his power but could be used more easily by the civil authority. He is to be a blind giant—blind to the ends which he serves, adding only might to the means which are to achieve them.[14] This is an intolerable solution for him, but the alternative would be for the Lilliputians to alter themselves to fit him. The disproportion is too great. Finally, the high hopes deceived, the kings of both Lilliput and Blefuscu are heartily glad to be rid of him. This is Swift's description of his own situation and that of other great men.

This interpretation of Lilliput depends, of course, on the information supplied by the voyage to Brobdingnag. Gulliver's superiority to the Lilliputians is as the Brobdingnagians' superiority to him. Against the background of Brobdingnag, Gulliver's moral perspective comes into focus. The Brobdingnagians are great because they are virtuous; they are, particularly, temperate. Political life is not a plaything of their lusts. There is neither faction nor Christian controversy (they are polytheists).[15] Hence there is no war, for they have no neighbors and no civil strife—not because of the victory of one part of the body politic over the others, but because of the judicious blending of all three parts. They maintain themselves in a state of constant preparedness, simply for the sake of preserving the advantages stemming from military virtue. Theirs is entirely a citizen army. Their concentration is on obedience to law, not interpretation of it. Law is powerful so long as it is respected, and respect implies assent. The mind should not be used to reason away the clear bases of duty. No commentaries are allowed on the laws. There is no political science. Their learning is only such as will produce good citizens, or, put otherwise, their studies are made to produce not learning, but virtue.

[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 76–77.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 127.

They know morality, history, poetry, and mathematics, and that is all.[16]

The vices that Gulliver finds in the common people are at worst summed up in an excess of thrift, and most are simply a result of his peculiar perspective; he assumes ill-intention where there is probably only indifference or inattention. The Brobdingnagians are a simple, decent people whose state exists, not for the pursuit of knowledge or the cultivation of diversity, but for the sake of well-known, common-sense virtues. Brobdingnag is a sort of cross between Sparta and republican Rome; it concurs in almost all respects with the principles of Aristotle's *Ethics*. Swift was an enemy of the Enlightenment, its learning and its politics.

We can make only a short visit to Laputa.[17] Gulliver goes there, after having seen modern politics, to see modern science and its effects on life. He finds a theoretical preoccupation, which is abstracted from all human concerns and which did not start from the human dimension. On the flying island the men have one eye turned inward, the other toward the zenith; they are perfect Cartesians—one egotistical eye contemplating the self, one cosmological eye surveying the most distant things. The intermediate range, which previously was the center of concentration and which defined both the ego and the pattern for the study of the stars, is not within the Laputian purview. The only studies are astronomy and music, and the world is reduced to these two sciences. The men have no contact with objects of sensation; this is what permits them to remain content with their science. Communication with others is unnecessary, and the people require a beating to respond to them. Rather than making their mathematics follow the natural shapes of things, they change things so as to fit their mathematics; the food is cut into all sorts of geometrical figures. Their admiration for women, such as it is, is due to the resemblance of women's various parts to specific figures. Jealousy is

[16]*Ibid.*, p. 153.

[17]For the interpretation of the details of the voyages to Laputa and Lagado, cf. Marjorie Nicolson, *Science and Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956), pp. 110–154; *Voyages to the Moon* (New York: Macmillan, 1948); with Nora Mohler, "The Scientific Background of Swift's Voyage to Laputa," *Annals of Science*, II (1937), 299–334; "Swift's Flying Island in the Voyage to Laputa," *ibid.*, pp. 405–30.

The unifying theme of all of Swift's criticism of the new science is not the external absurdity of its propositions, or its impious character, or its newness, but its partialness and abstraction from what is known about human things. Modern science represented a complete break with classical principles and methods, and Swift believed that there was a whole range of phenomena it could not grasp but which it would distort. The commitment to it, if absolutized, would destroy the human orientation. This contention remains to be refuted.

unknown to them; their wives can commit adultery before their eyes without being noticed. Above all, they lack a sense for poetry. This is a touchstone for Gulliver; no mention is made of poetry in Lilliput and Laputa, although both the Brobdingnagians and the Houyhnhnms have excellent poetry, of a Homeric kind.[18] Poetry expresses the rhythm of life, and its images capture the color of reality. Men without poetry are without a grasp of humanity, for the poetic is the human supplement to philosophy—not poetry in our more modern sense, but in that of the great epics which depict the heroes who are our models for emulation. Modern science cannot understand poetry, and hence it can never be a science of man.

Another peculiarity of these men is described by Gulliver as follows. "What I chiefly admired, and thought altogether unaccountable, was the strong disposition I observed in them towards news and politics, perpetually inquiring into public affairs, giving their judgments in matters of state, and passionately disputing every inch of a party opinion. I have indeed observed the same disposition among most of the mathematicians I have known in Europe, although I could never discover the least analogy between the two sciences."[19] Gulliver, we see, has recovered his old superiority. On this theme of science and politics, so important today, Swift's perspicacity is astonishing. He not only recognizes the scientists' professional incapacity to understand politics, but also their eagerness to manipulate it, as well as their sense of special right to do so. The Laputians' political power rests on the new science. Their flying island is built on the principles of the new physics founded by Gilbert and Newton. Swift saw the possibility of great inventions that would open new avenues to political endeavor. This island allows the king and the nobles to live free from conspiracies by the people—in fact free from contact with them—while still making use of them and receiving the tribute which is necessary to the maintenance and leisure of the rulers. They can crush the terrestrial cities; their power is almost unlimited and their responsibilities nil.[20] Power is concentrated in the hands of the rulers; hence they are not forced even by fear to develop a truly political intelligence. They require no virtue; everything runs itself, so there is no danger that their incompetence, indifference, or vice will harm them. Their island allows their characteristic deformity to grow to the point of monstrosity. Science, in freeing men, destroys the natural conditions which make them human. Here, for the first time in history,

[18]*Gulliver's Travels, op. cit.*, pp. 153, 311; cf. p. 184.
[19]*Ibid.*, p. 185.
[20]*Ibid.*, p. 194.

is the possibility of tyranny grounded not on ignorance, but on science. Science is no longer theoretical, but serves the wishes and hence the passions of men.

Gulliver is disgusted by this world; he represents common sense, and he is despised for it. This he finds disagreeable, and he seeks to return to earth, where he can be respected. But in Lagado, he finds things even worse; everything is topsy-turvy because what works has been abandoned in favor of projects. Here Gulliver's critique, although funny, impresses us less than it does elsewhere. He seems to have seriously underestimated the possible success of the projects. But perhaps some of the reasons supporting this posture are still intelligible to us. The transformations planned by the projectors are direct deductions from the principles used in Laputa; they are willing to give up the old life and the virtues it engendered for the sake of a new life based only on wishes. If the new life succeeded it might produce some comforts; but they do not know what that way of life will do to them. This transformation and this incertitude induce Gulliver to be conservative. He distrusts the motives of the projectors and wonders if they do not represent a debasement of the noble purposes of contemplation. If Gulliver is not right in ridiculing the possibilities of applied science, he may nevertheless be right in doubting its desirability. At any rate, there is today in America a school of social criticism which is heavy-handedly saying the same thing. And as for education and politics, Gulliver looks as sound as ever when he ridicules substitutes for intelligence and study, or when he outlines Harold Lasswell's anal science of politics. Gulliver's attack on modern science and projecting foresaw the problem which has only recently struck the popular consciousness: what does the conquest of nature do to the conquerors?

The visit to Glubdubdribb allows Gulliver to see modern historical science as it really is, because he is able to evoke the shades of those with whom it deals. History is of particular importance, because from it one can understand what has been lost or gained and the direction in which one is going. We learn that this science is most inaccurate. It has embellished modern men and misunderstood the ancients; even our knowledge of the Greek language has decayed to the point of incomprehensibility. Gulliver most admires Homer, Aristotle, and the heroes who opposed tyranny. There is only one modern—Sir Thomas More—among these latter. All the later interpreters of the poets and the philosophers misunderstood and denatured them. An effort to recover them must be made; and the result of that study will be the recognition of the unqualified superiority of classical antiquity. "I desired that the senate of Rome might appear before me in one large chamber, and a modern representative, in counterview, in

another. The first seemed an assembly of heroes and demigods; the other, a knot of pedlars, pick-pockets, highwaymen and bullies."[21]

The fourth and last stop which we must make in the voyage to Laputa is Luggnag. Here Gulliver has his interlude on immortality. Death is feared in all other nations, but not in Luggnag, where immortality is constantly present in the form of the Struldbrugs. The desire for immortality, or the fear of death, leads men to all kinds of vain hopes and wishes. Gulliver is to some extent released from this anxiety by his experience with the Struldbrugs, who never die but grow ever older. They are repulsive and have no human traits. "They were not only opinionative, peevish, covetous, morose, and talkative, but incapable of friendship and dead to all natural affection. . . . Envy and impotent desires are their prevailing passions."[22] They hate all that is young. No doubt, most men would prefer to be dead than to live this living death. However, it has often been remarked that to the extent one can imagine immortality, one can imagine perpetual youth. Gulliver himself imagines perpetual youth when he discovers the existence of the Struldbrugs and learns that they are not advisers at court, but are banished. He is surprised. These particular immortals grow old and decrepit; the criticism of man's desire for immortality applies only to the versions of it which do not include perpetual youth.

Now, why has Swift presented his case in this way? One might suggest that he was reflecting on the only example in our world of an institution that claims immortality, namely, the Church. I gather this from Gulliver's concluding remark about the Struldbrugs, who are not allowed to hold employment of public trust or to purchase lands: "I could not but agree that the laws of this kingdom relative to the Struldbrugs were founded upon the strongest reasons and such as any other country would be under necessity of enacting in the like circumstances. Otherwise, as avarice is the necessary consequent of old age, those immortals would in time become proprietors of the whole nation, and engross the civil power, which, for want of abilities to manage, must end in the ruin of the public."[23]

This merely echoes the views prevailing in England after the Reformation on the importance of limiting church lands, especially those of the Roman Catholic Church. Modern times are characterized

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 223.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 242.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 244. Although Swift defended the property of the Church of Ireland, he did it only within severe limits and for the sake of preserving an important civil institution. He well knew the dangers of the higher clergy's possible avarice, and he also was perfectly aware of the political difficulties caused by the property and influence of the Roman Church prior to the Reformation.

by an immortal body inhabiting, but not truly part of, civil society—a decrepit body with a dangerous tendency to aggrandize itself. Death is preferable to the extension of life represented in the Church; and civil society is safe only so long as that body is contained by law.

The voyage to the Houyhnhnms is of particular significance in our cross-examination of Lemuel Gulliver, for this was his last trip and the one that most affected him; it is under the influence of seeing Houyhnhnms contrasted with Yahoos that he wrote this book, which had as its explicit end the reform of all human vices. In Lilliput and Laputa he learned nothing and found nothing to admire; in Brobdingnag he admired; but among the Houyhnhnms he imitated. Any reform must be in the direction of their practices. The Houyhnhnms are not human beings; man's standard is now a nonhuman one. What Swift has done in the land of the Houyhnhnms is to elaborate a utopia, a utopia based on Plato's *Republic*; but it is a super *Republic*, for the problem which made the construction of the best city so difficult for Socrates has disappeared—the Houyhnhnms lack the passionate part of the soul. The whole difficulty in the *Republic* is to make the three orders take their proper role in relation to one another. Punishment and rhetoric are necessary; the book is full of the struggle between the rational and the appetitive; and the irascible or spirited, intended as reason's ally, shows a constant tendency to turn against it. The passionate and the spirited are in perfect natural harmony with the rational in the Houyhnhnms. Swift has taken everything that was connected with the passionate or erotic nature and made a kind of trash heap from it, which he calls the Yahoos. Or, in another and more adequate formulation, Swift has extrapolated the Houyhnhnms from man as depicted by Plato, and the Yahoos from man as depicted by Hobbes.

It is not correct to say that this section is a depreciation of man in general in favor of animals, for the animals are very particular animals, possessing certain human characteristics of a Platonic order, and the men are a very particular kind of passionate men. Man has a dual nature—part god, part beast; Swift has separated the two parts. In reality they are in tension with one another, and one must decide which is in the service of the other. Are the passions directed to the service of reason, or is reason the handmaiden of the passions? If the latter, then the Yahoo is the real man; if the former, then the Houyhnhnms represent man as he really is. The separation effected by Swift leads to clarity about the ends.

Nature is the standard, and the Houyhnhnms are "the perfection of nature," which is what the name means. Nature is Parmenidean;

being *is*; the changeable has no meaning. The Houyhnhnms speak and speculate only about what is, for only what is can be said. There is not even a word for opinion, nor do the Houyhnhnms have those passions which partake of nonbeing. There is nothing in them that can take account of what is not or can partake of what is not; hence they cannot say what is not. They need not lie, for like Plato's gods, they need not deceive, nor do they have friends who need to be deceived. Virtue for them is knowledge. They see what must be done and do it; there is no need of moral habituation. They always reason like philosophers; when they recognize what a phenomenon is, they say so—otherwise they say nothing. This is why Gulliver is such a problem: is he a Yahoo or is he not?[24] He is and he is not. This, by the way, perhaps indicates a weakness in the Houyhnhnms' understanding; they cannot adequately grasp this composite being.

Gulliver, who in the first stages of his relationship with his master tried to obscure his Yahoo nature, is finally forced to undress himself. He makes a sort of girdle "to hide my nakedness," echoing Adam before the Lord. Gulliver again feels shame, as he did in Brobdingnag. The Houyhnhnms are shameless; no part of the body is any more or less beautiful than another.[25] Gulliver feels shame because he is a lustful being and cannot control desires which he understands to be bad. He is a sinner and a repenter, whereas the Houyhnhnms are like Aristotle's gentleman who never blushes because he has nothing to be ashamed of. This is the indication which allows us to see the Yahoos as peculiarly modern man. They are a sort of cross between man as Augustine describes him and as Hobbes describes him. They have the uncontrollably corrupted nature of Augustinian man, with particular concentration on sexual lust. And the relation of Yahoos to one another is one of Hobbesean war. The Yahoos have infinite desires, and most of all they hate to see anyone else taking possession of anything at all. They are needy beings with a constant sense of scarcity. They hoard and have an unlimited desire for gold without any idea of what they want to use it for. They know of no natural limits, so they are never satisfied. They are strong, but fearful; and they set a leader over themselves to govern them.[26] If one conceives of the real life of man as in the passions, this is the kind of picture one must have of him. There is absolutely no suggestion in Swift's view of the Houyhnhnms that a being who senses his own corruption and tries to improve himself, or who yearns for salvation, is desirable.

[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 267, 272, 304, 313, 319, 261, 263, 266–70, 274–75, 291.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 269.
[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 296–304.

There can be little doubt that the land of the Houyhnhnms is a perfection of the *Republic*. A glance at the list of similarities is convincing; the changes are all based on the Houyhnhnms' superiority. There is hardly any need for politics because the citizens are so orderly and accept their roles. The needs that cause war are absent. The rulers are free to converse. They are philosophers; in one example of their reasoning—the explanation of the origin of Yahoos—they reason exactly like pre-Socratic philosophers. At all events, this is a land ruled by philosophers.

The Houyhnhnms live simply, and their wants are provided by the community. There is no money. Because they live simply and naturally, there is no need for the arts of medicine or of forensic rhetoric. There is a class system, but one based entirely on natural differences. They do not fear death nor do they mourn those who depart. They regard the land as their first mother. They belong to the land as a whole and have no special, private interests.

To come to the paradoxes treated in Book V of the *Republic*, there is also among the Houyhnhnms equality of women and virtual community of wives and children. Marriages are arranged on grounds of reason; *eros* does not play a role. They separate into couples and have private houses, but when necessary they break up families, service one another, and switch children—all this in the name of the community as a whole. Friendship and benevolence are their virtues and the themes of their conversation. Their poetry, which has all the power of Homeric epics, supports their character. There is, therefore, no need for any of the elaborate devices mentioned in the *Republic* for the censorship of poetry or the destruction of the family interest. There is no distinction between public and private, between the good and one's own. They do not love their children; they take care of them for the sake of the common good.[27]

The contrast in Book IV is between Plato and Hobbes, between the perfected political animal and man in the state of nature. The Yahoos have tyrants; the Houyhnhnms are republicans who need no subordination because they have sufficient virtue to govern themselves. Swift took refuge in animals because nothing in the conception of man indicated the possibility of such a regime in state or soul. He conceived a hatred of the Yahoos; for only by this self-contempt could he cultivate that in himself which was akin to the Houyhnhnms.

It has been asked, Why, with all their virtues, do the Houyhnhnms have no god? But this clearly follows from their prin-

[27] *Ibid.*, pp. 304–17. Note the reference to Socrates and Plato at the beginning of this passage.

ciple. They cannot say the thing which is not. They can see only the permanent, eternal, unchanging being. In England, Yahoos have a religion; their sacred issues cannot even be rendered in the Houyhnhnm language.[28] These Trojan horses contain more than they appear to. In Books I and II, size is the illustrative device. Here the meaning is projected by difference of species.

Gulliver's Travels has often been called a misanthropic book. Indeed, it does not present a very flattering picture of man. But we should ask ourselves what a misanthrope is. If anything, he is a hater of humanity—one who had great expectations of others and has been deceived. Above all—if we can believe Molière—he is a man who tries to live according to the highest standards of virtue and finds they are unacceptable in human society; he is a man who always tells the truth and acts according to principle. Rousseau, who left society to return to nature, was a misanthrope; and Kant taught the absolute morality of the misanthrope. Gulliver, in his letter to Sympson, doubtlessly speaks in the tones of a misanthrope. He has renounced all hopes of human reform, because he gave his countrymen six months since the publication of his book, which is surely more than sufficient, to improve—and they have not improved a bit.

But we also know that Gulliver is a liar and admires successful liars like Sinon. A liar can hardly be a misanthrope; he cares enough about his fellow men to respect their prejudices; noble lies are acts of generosity. They are based on the truth of becoming and the existence of opinion; they prove an understanding of this world, an understanding not possessed by Houyhnhnms. Finally, and above all, misanthropes are not funny; this world and morality are too serious for that. I do not know about Gulliver, but Swift is surely one of the funniest men who ever lived. His misanthropy is a joke; it is the greatest folly in the world to attempt to improve humanity. That is what it means to understand man. And, after all, perhaps we are not serious beings. In the jest, there is a truth; we glimpse the necessity of the distinction between what we are and what we ought to be. But this leaves us with a final impression of fond sympathy for poor mortals. To understand is to accept; *Gulliver's Travels* makes misanthropy ridiculous by showing us the complexity of our *nature* and thereby teaching us what we must accept.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 279. These issues are called "difference in opinions." Cf. the Houyhnhnms' view of opinion, p. 304.